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Committee on Energy and Natural Resources

Concerning

2002 Wildfire Season
2003 Preparedness
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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to meet with you today. Since the Department of the Interior and the Department of Agriculture work closely together in fire management and in implementing the National Fire Plan, it is appropriate to use one statement to talk about the 2002 wildland fire season, and discuss our work on the National Fire Plan and the President's Healthy Forest Initiative. President Bush's proposed Healthy Forests Initiative is based upon a common-sense approach to reducing the threat of catastrophic wildfires by restoring forest and rangeland health. Our goal is to ensure the long-term safety and health of communities and natural resources in our care. Our responsibility is to ensure the long-term health of our forests and rangelands for the use, benefit and enjoyment of our citizens and for generations to come.

As we move into the 2003 fire season, fighting wildland fires is only one aspect of the work we must do to protect communities; we must also reduce the amount of hazardous fuels, and restore healthy ecosystems to protect communities and our natural resources.

NATIONAL FIRE PLAN

With the fire adapted ecosystems of North America, we have the challenging task of reducing fuels and the vulnerability of our communities to wildfire while restoring the health of our forests and rangelands. This challenge is national and long term in scope. Of the three factors that most influence wildland fire behavior – weather, topography, and fuel - land managers can effectively affect only fuel. Since the severe 2000 wildland fire season, Congress has funded the National Fire Plan for federal agencies to work on a long-term program to reduce fire risk and restore healthy fire-adapted ecosystems in the Nation's forests and rangelands. Federal agency field units, States, Tribes, and other partners have been busy, putting into action the concepts of the National Fire Plan. Bipartisan Congressional support provided the funding necessary in 2002 for 17,400 federal fire employees and thousands of contract fire personnel to prevent, detect, and suppress wildland fires, treat hazardous fuels, and provide leadership for the organizations. In 2002, despite the severe drought, the Forest

Service and the Department of the Interior accomplished a total of 2.2 million acres of hazardous fuels reduction; of that, almost 1 million acres were in the wildland urban interface. This is 168,000 acres more than 2001. We also reduced hazardous fuels on slightly more than 1million additional acres through wildland fire use. For 2003, we anticipate treating 2.5 million acres of hazardous fuels of which 1.1 million acres are in the wildland urban interface.

Recently, the Forest Service, Department of the Interior, National Association of State Foresters and National Association of Counties agreed to a collaborative process to identify fuels treatments. In order to more expeditiously protect communities and improve forest and rangeland health, the parties agreed to coordinate this process across ownerships and jurisdictions.

2002 FIRE SEASON

The 2002 wildland fire season was intense, difficult, and historic. Long-term drought over most of the West contributed to an earlier and very severe fire season. Fires burned in every type of vegetation from grasslands to subalpine pine and in every type of ownership. Of the 7.2 million acres burned in 2002, only a few wildfires were the large, uncontrolled fires seen on television. These were the fires that burned in and around wildland-urban interface areas requiring extensive evacuations of communities, subdivisions, and ranches. Fire activity was intensified by unfavorable weather conditions and in many situations posed a safety threat to firefighters and members of the public.

Large wildfires can create unhealthy air conditions. In 2002, at the request of certain local health agencies, the Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, Fish and Wildlife Service, and EPA cooperated in deploying air quality monitors near where the public might be affected by the smoke. On the Hayman and Rodeo-Chedeski fires, the smoke at all of the special sites did not reach unhealthy levels as defined by the National Ambient Air Quality Standards or state alert levels. On the Missionary Ridge fire, the monitor at Bayfield exceeded the one-hour PM2.5 alert levels, which means that air quality was more hazardous to people's health. State of Colorado monitoring in downtown Denver, however, measured unhealthy levels and were the highest levels ever measured. The Biscuit Fire in Oregon also had high (unhealthy) levels from wildfire smoke. The smoke from these wildfires reached more unhealthy levels and was of a much longer duration than any that might be produced by prescribed burning. Precribed burns are of shorter duration, are done under conditions that disperse smoke, and are in compliance with states' smoke management programs.

When we realized the potential severity of the 2002 wildland fire season, we hired seasonal firefighters early and we staged firefighting crews and equipment in locations where they could be mobilized quickly and effectively. Federal wildland fire agencies had enhanced initial attack capabilities in Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, Montana, and Nevada by pre-positioning resources ranging from air support, to hand crews, to engines in strategic locations. Although several fires were large, the additional resources made a difference in reducing the size of many of the fires. Without the added National Fire Plan support, our response would not have been as strong. Initial attack suppression activities were highly successful, as about 98% of 2002 wildfires were stopped during initial attack. We sustained 62 days of Preparedness Level 5, our highest level of activity, 22 days longer than the 2000 wildland fire season, another record year. Modular Airbourne Firefighting System military aircraft were based in Colorado, Utah, Washington, Idaho, and California to support ground fireline building activities. One battalion from the U.S. Army, Task Force Destroyer (1/5 FA 1st Battalion, 5th Regiment) Fort Riley, Kansas was also assigned for 30 days. International firefighting assistance was provided by Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. These international resources provided a total of

thirty-nine 20-person hand crews, and 131 overhead or management personnel assisted in fire suppression activities across the West.

ENVIRONMENTAL EFFECTS OF WILDFIRE

For most of the twentieth century, all wildland fires were generally thought to be bad. As a result, fires were suppressed as soon as possible to reduce their negative effect. Aggressive fire suppression was effective but had an unintended consequence. The frequency and intensity of wildfires appears to have increased due to the buildup of fuels such as dead and dying trees and dense growth of flammable vegetation. Fire exclusion resulted in woody species encroachment into shrublands and grasslands, altered wildlife diversity and populations patterns through habitat modification, and increased disease, insect infestations, and invasive plant species. This build up of fuel coupled with other factors like drought have raised increasing concerns about the overall wildland condition and particularly the health of the forest and rangelands.

These conditions of increased fuel and severe drought have resulted in increasingly large and severe wildland fires. Damage to watersheds is the most undesirable environmental impact associated with these large and severe fires. Damage to wildlife habitat and forests, temporary but reduced air quality, and erosion, also are the undesirable effects of large and severe fires. Where these types of fire occur in the wildland urban interface, the risks to people and the expense are greater.

However, where the natural fire return interval has been maintained through prescribed burning or where the buildup of fuels, such as thick understory and dense trees, have been thinned by environmentally sound forest management practices, these wildfires can be beneficial. This is particularly so in plant communities that have historically experienced frequent light fires such as ponderosa pine. Light and moderate fires generally leave the soil intact, recycle nutrients, and stimulate the regeneration of many beneficial plant species. These fires often create a patchy mosaic on the landscape, increasing the overall biological diversity or health of the area over the long term.

2002 REHABILITATION AND RESTORATION

Rehabilitation and restoration are critical parts of responding to the aftermath of wildfire. These efforts focus on lands unlikely to recover quickly and naturally from wildfire. Rehabilitation activities generally take several years and include reforestation, watershed restoration, road and trail rehabilitation, noxious weed control, and fish and wildlife habitat restoration. Native plants and trees are used whenever possible.

The majority of the work to be accomplished in FY 2003 results from the negative fire effects from the Rodeo/Chediski, Hayman, McNally, Biscuit, and Missionary Ridge Fires of 2002. Treatments planned in FY 2003 will accelerate the restoration of forested ecosystems and wildlife habitat, will more rapidly improve water quality, and allow for earlier access for visitation to National Forests by returning recreational facilities to safe conditions.

Previous commitments and priorities for rehabilitation of damage caused by the fires of 2000, are also the focus of this years planned rehabilitation and restoration efforts. These priorities include completing multi-year reforestation work already underway with nurseries, and continuing watershed and road work provided for in the Bitterroot Settlement agreement.

Through Burned Area Emergency Response (BAER) plans in 2002, $72 million was made available for immediate emergency stabilization after fires. This post-fire work focuses on preventing additional damage to the land, and minimizing threats to life or property resulting form the effects of fire. This work typically begins before the fire is completely contained and is generally accomplished with the first year after the fire.

Like the Forest Service, the Department of the Interior experienced a demanding workload for stabilizing and rehabilitating burned areas after wildfires. Interior made $78.5 million available for emergency stabilization and burned area rehabilitation last year, with $15 million carrying over to continue stabilization efforts this year. The carryover from FY 2002 plus the FY 2003 appropriation will provide the Department with $35 million for emergency stabilization and rehabilitation in FY 2003. This funding has been targeted to priority projects to protect public health and safety, protect municipal water supplies, threatened and endangered species habitat, and prevent invasive plant establishment.

SAFETY

We thank you and your committee for your support of the men and women who make up our firefighting corps. Our firefighters do an impressive job under adverse conditions and they deserve our thanks and admiration. Firefighting is a high risk, high consequence activity. Following the Thirtymile Fire tragedy in July 2001, where four firefighters lost their lives, we reexamined our safety programs and made a number of improvements. Through training and reinforcement, we are emphasizing management of firefighter fatigue, use of the 10 Standard Fire Orders and the 18 Watch Out situations. We have revamped our training to include findings and lessons learned from the Thirtymile incident. Firefighter briefings now include standard components that address planned suppression operations, hazards and risks, critical fuels and weather conditions, and other crucial information. We have an improved fire shelter which is used as a "last resort" tool and a key component of fire fighter safety equipment.

Despite our efforts, there were 23 fire-related Federal, states, or volunteer fatalities in the 2002 wildland fire season. Over half the fatalities were contractors to federal agencies; most of the fatalities were the result of vehicle accidents, some attributed to fatigue. Therefore, we are including in FY 2003 contracts federal firefighter work-rest guidelines to minimize fatigue for contracted firefighters and support personnel. Six fatalities resulted from 3 aviation accidents. The Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management commissioned an aviation blue-ribbon panel that surveyed the aviation program and made findings. Based on the findings, the Departments made several changes to the aviation program, including extensive inspections of airtankers as well as grounding other aircraft until air worthiness can be assured. In addition, Sandia Lab in Albuquerque is developing increased aircraft safety criteria for Forest Service contracted aircraft.

WHAT COMMUNITIES CAN DO

More than 2,000 structures were lost to wildfires last year. Of the structures destroyed, 835 were primary residences, 46 were commercial properties, and 1,500 were outbuildings. Communities can help themselves to prevent this sort of loss in the future. Indeed, with our State Forester partners through the State Fire Assistance program, we assisted over 11,000 communities by developing local projects on fire prevention, fire suppression, hazard mitigation, and creating FIREWISE communities. In 2002, both Departments helped over 5,000 rural and volunteer fire departments by providing training, protective fire clothing, and firefighting equipment through the Volunteer and Rural Fire

Assistance programs. Additional efforts will promote partnerships, community action plans, and projects where communities can themselves reduce fuel hazards, improve building codes, and create fire resistant landscapes.

National fire prevention teams were activated throughout the year in many Western states where fire danger was extreme. Teams were dispatched for month-long assignments to assist local resources in assessing human-caused fire starts. Once assessments are complete, these trained fire prevention professionals prepare a site-specific strategy of unique fire prevention solutions for the area. Fire prevention teams were placed in Salt Lake City, UT, Santa Fe, NM, Custer, SD, Seattle, WA, Sequoia National Forest, CA, and Colorado Springs and Durango, CO.

In addition, citizens can take action through the FIREWISE program, which helps people who live or vacation in fire-prone areas educate themselves about wildland fire protection. Homeowners can learn how to protect their homes with a survivable space and how to landscape their yard with fire resistant materials. A consortium of wildland fire agencies that include the Forest Service, the Department of the Interior, the National Fire Protection Association, and the National Association of State Foresters sponsors the program.

COSTS

There is no question that fighting these fires was expensive – the total cost for both Departments was almost $1.6 billion. The Forest Service transferred approximately $1 billion from other accounts to fund fire suppression costs. We want to thank Congress for acting upon the Administration's request for repayment. The Forest Service has established a priority process to repay the accounts from which funds were transferred, and every effort will be made to repay these in a timely fashion.

Interior also had emergency wildfire response costs that exceeded funding available within the fire management appropriation by more than $250 million last year. The Secretary transferred $240 million from the construction and land acquisition accounts of the land management bureaus and BIA to cover most of the additional costs for emergency suppression and stabilization. The fire program also reprogrammed $14 million intended for fire facility maintenance and construction and hazardous fuels reduction projects.

Recent criticism of how the Forest Service and the Department of the Interior spend funds to suppress wildfire is of great concern to the Departments and the agencies. In response to criticisms that occurred during this past fire season, Forest Service Chief Dale Bosworth in cooperation with Interior agencies promptly dispatched an accountability team to review specific expenses and policies that may have contributed to unnecessary expenditures on large fires. As a result of this and other interagency efforts, new procedures have been established that will focus on cost containment strategies in suppressing wildfire and eliminating unnecessary expenses; establish clearer financial management accountability of incident commanders and line officers; and provide for improved controls and incentives for suppression costs.

Additionally, the Forest Service and the Department of the Interior will fully implement performance measures that reflect the level of risk reduced by treatments as part of the interagency effort to increase accountability of Federal wildand fire management efforts.

In implementing these performance measures, it is important to emphasize that firefighter safety and the protection of communities will not be compromised. As we focus on an efficient wildland firefighting organization, we must not lose sight of the fact that fire suppression often is an expensive operation where major costs will be most substantially reduced by accomplishing the goals of the President's Healthy Forests Initiative and the National Fire Plan.

2003 SEASONAL WILDLAND FIRE OUTLOOK

At this time, our experts at the National Interagency Coordination Center (NICC) in Boise, Idaho, indicate that long term drought persists and is expected to intensify over much of the interior West. Mountain snow pack and precipitation remains below average for most of the western states with the exception of northern and central California. The outlook for February through April calls for above normal temperatures and below normal precipitation over the Pacific Northwest, Northern Rockies, portions of the Great Lakes, and the Ohio River Valley. Unless the weather patterns provide relief, 2003 has the potential for an above normal fire season in these areas, especially in the interior West, the Lake states, and northern Maine.

Drought conditions and dense vegetation increase the risk of wildfires that burn longer, faster, and more intensely. We know that fire historically played a positive role in sustaining ecological stability. Where appropriate, we will manage wildland fire use as prescribed in land and resource management plans. However, because of the altered condition of many forests and grasslands, use of fire for forest management has become much more complex. It requires scientific support and new tools to help plan, implement and monitor fire management activities. One of these tools is the President's Healthy Forest Initiative.

THE PRESIDENT'S HEALTHY FOREST INITIATIVE

In May 2002, working with the Western Governors' Association and a broad cross-section of interests including county commissioners, state foresters, tribal officials and other stakeholders, we reached consensus on a 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy and Implementation Plan to reduce fire risks to communities and the environment. The plan sets forth the blueprint for making communities and the environment safer from destructive wildfires. The plan calls for active forest management focusing on hazardous fuels reduction both in the wildland-urban interface and across the broader landscape. Active forest management includes: thinning trees from over-dense stands that produce commercial or pre-commercial products, biomass removal and utilization, and prescribed fire and other fuels reduction tools.

In order for the 10-Year Implementation Plan to succeed, the Forest Service and Interior agencies must be able to implement critical fuels reduction and restoration projects associated with the plan goals in a timely manner. Often, however, the agencies are constrained by procedural requirements and litigation that delay actual on-the-ground implementation. As we testified last September, the three factors most contributing to project delay are: 1) excessive analysis; 2) ineffective public involvement; and 3) management inefficiencies. We have reached a point where we must change to allow agencies to implement management decisions to achieve healthy forests and rangelands.

On August 22, 2002, President Bush announced Healthy Forests: An Initiative for Wildfire Prevention and Stronger Communities. The Healthy Forest Initiative would implement core components of the

10-Year Implementation Plan, enhancing and facilitating the work and collaboration agreed to in that document.

The President's initiative directs us, together with Council on Environmental Quality Chairman Connaughton, to: improve procedures for collaborative selection and implementation of fuels treatments and forest and rangeland restoration projects; reduce the number of overlapping environmental reviews; develop guidance for weighing the short-term risks against the long-term benefits of fuels treatment and restoration projects; and develop guidance to ensure consistent NEPA procedures for fuels treatment activities and restoration activities. We will report today on several actions the Secretaries have taken to accomplish these objectives.

ADMINISTRATIVE ACTIONS

The USDA Forest Service and the Department of Interior have proposed two categorical exclusions that can be utilized in certain circumstances by the agencies to carry out hazardous fuel reduction and post-wildfire resource activities and activities infrastructure rehabilitation. These two categorical exclusions were based on an analysis of over 3,000 hazardous fuel reduction and post-wildfire restoration projects. Our analysis of these activities has shown that these types of narrowly defined actions have not resulted in individually or cumulatively significant environmental impacts, and therefore, may be conducted without preparation of an environmental assessment or environmental impact statement. We expect to publish final categorical exclusions later this year.

A categorical exclusion may not always be the appropriate level of analysis; each project is different and some may not meet the criteria for use of a CE. Therefore, Chairman Connaughton has issued guidance which clarifies the policy on the preparation of environmental assessments for fuels treatments. The clarification addresses the purpose and content of a model Environmental Assessment for fuels treatments. The guidance is being applied initially to ten Interior and five Forest Service projects to test the adequacy of the model EA to address the impacts typically found in fuels treatment projects. Process lessons learned in developing these projects will be shared widely throughout all agencies for application to additional projects.

The Forest Service has proposed revising its implementing regulations under the Appeals Reform Act. Proposed changes are designed to encourage early and meaningful public participation in project planning, rather than focusing the public on review of a completed EA and on appeal of a decision after it has been made. The proposal gives the line officer discretion over the timing of the 30-day notice and comment period, rather than requiring that it take place after the environmental assessment is complete. There would also be limitations on appeals based on early project involvement and on raising new issues that had not previously been raised. A final policy is expected to be published later this year.

The Department of the Interior's Office of Hearings and Appeals (OHA) and the BLM are proposing a series of changes to their administrative rules, to streamline their appeals process for hazardous fuels treatment projects. Interior wants to ensure that appeals from decisions involving either forest or rangeland health are resolved quickly without depriving the public of the right to participate in the administrative process. Frequently, delaying a project can be the same as stopping a project. The proposed rules would require OHA to resolve any appeal involving forest or rangeland health within sixty days from the filing of all paperwork from the parties. Forest and rangeland health appeals will not be subject to any different standards than other types of appeals. Under this proposal, they must

simply be handled first. The proposed rules also contain a number of technical changes that will allow OHA to do its job more efficiently and apply rules more consistently.

The Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration issued a joint guidance memo on Endangered Species Act Section 7 consultation in October, 2002. It emphasizes the use of programmatic interagency consultation under the Endangered Species Act for Healthy Forests Initiative projects. It also emphasizes the grouping of multiple projects into one consultation. These agencies also issued joint guidance in December, 2002 providing direction on how to fully consider and balance potential short- and long-term beneficial and adverse impacts to endangered species when evaluating proposed Healthy Forests Initiative projects.

In addition to these Healthy Forests Initiative actions, the Forest Service has proposed the addition of three new timber harvest categorical exclusions (CEs) to its authorities. Projects would include limited timber harvesting of live trees, salvage harvests, and sanitation of dead and dying trees for insect and disease control. Projects of this nature occur routinely as part of managing National Forest System lands.

LEGISLATIVE ACTIONS

In August, 2002, the Administration transmitted legislation to implement the Healthy Forest Initiative. Recently, the Congress passed the Consolidated Appropriations Resolution, 2003 [PL 108-7]. Section 323 of the Act contains stewardship contracting language that includes the Bureau of Land Management and extends authority through fiscal year 2013 for the Forest Service to enter into long-term stewardship contracts with the private sector, non-profit organizations, local communities, and other entities. Long-term contracts provide contractors the opportunity to invest in equipment and infrastructure needed to productively use material generated from forest thinning to make forest products or to produce energy. The Departments are currently developing public involvement methods and are working with the state Governors, counties and interested parties to develop procedures for stewardship contracting.

As the Committee knows, the President's budget included proposals for the Healthy Forest Initiative. We look forward to working with your Committee to develop Healthy Forest legislation and pledge our cooperation.

SUMMARY

With the outlook for an upcoming severe fire season, the five federal land-managing agencies and our partners at the State and local level are doing all that we can to be prepared. Safety of firefighters and communities is our first priority. With the fire adapted ecosystems of North America, we have the challenging task of reducing fuels and the vulnerability of our communities to wildfire while restoring the health of our forests and rangelands. This challenge is national and long term in scope. The 10-Year Implementation Plan and the Wildland Fire Leadership Council will continue to foster cooperation and communication among Federal agencies, States, local governments, Tribes, and interested groups and citizens. With your continued help, all the agencies can accomplish robust performance-based programs for the nation's forests and rangelands, and do so in full collaboration with state governments, communities, Congress and the American people.

We look forward to working with you in implementing the agency's programs and would be happy to answer any questions.